



Pick Your Path to Health

Alcohol, Health, and You

Whether you call it booze, brews, juice, or sauce, its real name is alcohol. And whether you're drinking a 12-ounce beer, a 1.5-ounce shot of liquor, or a 5-ounce glass of wine, you're getting the same effect. Your body reacts when you drink alcohol, and when you drink too much, your body suffers.

According to the *Women of Color Health Data Book*, published by the National Institutes of Health, African American females are generally less likely than white females to report consuming alcohol. Similarly, female African American teenagers are less likely to be current users of alcohol than their white peers. Still, alcohol is a problem in the African American community, and some recent surveys find that alcohol use is on the rise in this population.

The risks

So, what are risks associated with drinking alcohol?

- Short-term effects of alcohol use may include distorted vision, hearing, and coordination; altered perceptions and emotions; impaired judgement; and hangovers.
- Long-term effects of heavy alcohol use may include sexual impotence, cirrhosis of the liver, inflammation of the pancreas, stroke, cancer, and damage to the brain and heart.
- Alcohol abuse can cause psychological problems and may raise the risk for violence and suicide.
- Alcohol and driving is a deadly combination. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 38 percent of all traffic crashes in 1999 were alcohol-related.
- Women who drink during pregnancy put their babies at risk for various birth defects, including fetal alcohol syndrome.
- Alcohol interacts negatively with hundreds of medications. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before drinking any alcohol if you are taking over-the-counter or prescription medications.

Do you have an alcohol problem?

Drinking in moderation is defined as no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men. Drinking in greater quantities,

however, can bring about significant physical, mental, social, financial, and familial problems. So how do you know if you have a problem?

Take this short quiz:

- Do you drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work?
- Does your drinking worry your family?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself you won't?
- Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
- Do you get headaches or have a hangover after you have been drinking?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may have a drinking problem. You should begin to cut back on your drinking, or completely eliminate alcohol from your diet. If you're not able to do this on your own, you should get help.

Where do I go for help?

The good news is that help is available and help is effective. If you think you have a problem with alcohol and want to get help, look in your local Yellow Pages under "Alcoholism" or contact:

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services
(212) 870-3400

or

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
(800) NCA-CALL

or

The National Black Alcoholism and Addictions Council

<http://www.borg.com/~nbac/>

Who should not drink at all?

Alcohol affects everyone differently, and for some people, the best choice is to avoid alcohol altogether. People who should not drink at all include:

- Children or adolescents—the legal drinking age is 21.
- Individuals who cannot restrict drinking to a moderate level. Those who are recovering alcoholics or problem drinkers should definitely steer clear of any amount of alcohol.

- Women who are pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant. Drinking during pregnancy can put your baby at risk for serious birth defects.
- Designated drivers. Drinking and driving is the cause of thousands of deaths each year. It's never safe to drink and drive.

If you fall into any of the descriptions above, stay away from alcohol. Having "just one drink" could have disastrous consequences.

Alcoholism is a serious problem that affects millions of American families. If you or someone you love has a problem, get help now. With effective treatment, you will find yourself on the path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."